

**The Report of the
Accreditation Visiting Team**

A University for Children
757 South Main Street
Springville, Utah 84663

February 19, 2003



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**THE REPORT OF THE
VISITING TEAM REVIEWING**

**A University for Children
757 South Main Street
Springville, Utah 84663**

February 19, 2003

UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

A major purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate inservice growth and school improvement. Consequently, requirements include not only meeting the standards of the Utah State Office of Education, but also completing a school evaluation every six years.

School evaluation is that effort by the local school staff to take a comprehensive look at the school's program, operation, and effect. The school determines how closely its purposes and philosophy coincide with its actual practices and the degree to which its stated objectives are being reached. It is a three-phased program: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators, and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, February 19, 2003, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to meet the requirements referred to above.

The entire staff of A University for Children is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the Visiting Team. The excellent leadership given by Principal Dr. Lillian Zarndt is commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for the generally fine program being provided for A University for Children students, and also for the professional attitude of all members of the group, which made it possible for them to see areas of weakness and strength and to suggest procedures for bringing about improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is even more important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more adequately meet the needs of the students of A University for Children.

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Lillian Zarndt	English, French, German, Latin, Greek

A UNIVERSITY FOR CHILDREN

MISSION STATEMENT

A University for Children is a school which helps students find their own best ways to learn and to achieve their potential physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. The purpose of this school is to encourage students to think and to become makers of meaning and vision.

BELIEF STATEMENTS

- We teach to shape the divine soul of the future.
- Learning must be life long for all involved: students, teachers, and parents.
- Students learn through exploration.
- Students learn through self-discovery.
- Students learn through service.
- Students learn through cooperation.
- Students learn through leadership development.
- Students learn best when their individual learning style is honored.

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Ralph Vander Heide, Accreditation Consultant, Visiting Team Chairperson

George Miller, Utah State Office of Education

Georgia Loutensock, Utah State Office of Education

A UNIVERSITY FOR CHILDREN

VISITING TEAM REPORT

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION DESCRIBING THE PURPOSE OF THE VISIT, THE SELF-IMPROVEMENT PLAN, CHARACTERISTICS ABOUT THE SCHOOL AND OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

A team of three educators visited A University for Children on February 19, 2003, to complete a site evaluation as part of the requirements for accreditation by the Northwest Association of Schools and of Colleges and Universities (NASCU) and the State of Utah.

At an informal breakfast meeting the team met with the administration, faculty, and some students and discussed various aspects of the work of the school. This activity was followed by a meeting with the school counselor/administrator and owner/administrator/teacher. At lunch time the team met with administrators, some parents, and some members of the school's board of trustees. The basic philosophy of the school, to teach and learn with "creative freedom," was stressed. Indeed, the very *raison de etre* of the school is to be creative and to "teach with a passion." The self-study and all persons associated with the school stress that A University for Children stands for "small group learning, free thinking, deep exploration, personal growth, social growth and self-responsibility."

The school has been in existence for eleven years. It was first accredited six years ago. Since that time enrollment has increased, and the school has expanded to occupy the first floor of a former public elementary school building in Springville. There are presently sixty-six students enrolled. Twenty-six are in grades K-5 and 30 are in grades 6-12. The school accepts youngsters as young as four. Students come mainly from the surrounding area (within 20 miles). However, this year nine foreign exchange students are enrolled from China, Germany, Korea, Thailand, Mongolia, and Russia. As of December 2002, eight students have graduated from A University for Children. The self-study notes: "Each of our students has left our school with at least one admittance letter to a university."

Students come from varied backgrounds. The school's self-study points out that all students "have one characteristic in common," namely, that all are bright and sensitive "but not necessarily in a conventional way."

Twelve full-time teachers comprise the faculty; part-time teachers are also employed. Six members make up the school board.

The school prepared for the accreditation evaluation visit by assigning an accreditation

team chair who directed the school's self-evaluation beginning nearly two years ago. Three focus groups, which included administrators, faculty, parents, and students, were organized to address different aspects of the self-study procedure, and each group issued a report on its work. A summary of the findings of the focus groups was issued on May 10, 2002.

The school followed the guidelines of *School Improvement: Focusing on Student Performance* (published by the National Study of School Evaluation) and the State of Utah publication, *Collaborating for Student Achievement*. School personnel have attended workshops on Utah's new "collaborating" process and also served as members of visiting teams at other schools.

One salient finding was that "quantitative reporting is often hampered by our very small sample sizes." Mass-oriented criteria were "not a good fit or representative of our school." Since the school has a strong belief in ongoing growth and change, it was concluded that "responsive growth is often better portrayed as individual qualitative growth rather than as a quantitative one."

The school updates a self-improvement plan each year. Furthermore, the focus groups well identified "areas of strength" and "areas of potential growth."

CHAPTER 2: DESCRIPTION OF THE VISITING TEAM'S PERSPECTIVE AS TO THE WORK OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL IN ADDRESSING EACH ASPECT OF THE SELF-STUDY REPORT

The School Profile:

The profile of A University for Children adequately portrays the school population, environment, curriculum, and other relevant information about the school, with emphasis on its mission, philosophy, and educational direction. The various sets of data that were collected for the profile provide a description of the "big picture" of the performance of A University for Children.

The school surveyed faculty, students, and parents concerning different aspects of the educational program. A systematic process of collecting and managing profile data was employed. Furthermore, the Visiting Team found that the school well analyzed, managed, communicated, and used the data in school improvement planning.

Some principal conclusions drawn from disaggregated analysis of the surveys and work of the focus groups lead to the following conclusions: teachers, students, and parents feel valued and important. The school takes action on goals for high student learning. Decision-making is aligned with the school's mission and beliefs. Mission and beliefs

are effectively shared. Some principal areas of potential growth include ongoing staff training for instructional goals and follow-up on implementation of training. There is also a need for consistent review and realignment of instruction on a schoolwide basis. A learning environment of respect needs to be created, to be shown by a sense of caring and belonging between students and by appropriate dress and language. Formalized research is needed to show success (or lack of success) resulting from action plan steps.

Beliefs and Mission Statement:

Beliefs

The school beliefs are free of jargon and truly represent the principal areas to which the school is committed. The beliefs are an outgrowth of several years of profiling; most have certainly been in place since the founding of the school, since the school was originally conceptualized to meet specific special needs and service specific special purposes. Principal among the beliefs are the following: "Learning must be life long... Students learn through exploration... self-discovery... service... cooperation... [and] leadership development... Students learn best when their individual learning style is honored."

The Visiting Team notes that the beliefs seem to express exactly what the school and all stakeholders want expressed. The team also concludes that all persons associated with the school are willing to make a commitment to the direction indicated by these beliefs. Every effort is made by the faculty, administrators, and parents to make certain that students of all ages understand the beliefs of the school and "buy into" those beliefs. The beliefs and desired outcomes of learning, as well as the mission statement, are posted throughout the school, including classrooms.

The Mission Statement

The mission statement is concise and powerful. It describes a compelling purpose and direction for the school. Indeed, it should motivate and inspire. The Visiting Team concludes that the mission statement is concise, yet sufficiently comprehensive to reflect a collective vision that focuses on the role the school must assume in shaping the future. The mission statement is as follows:

A University for Children is a school which helps students find their own best ways to learn and to achieve their potential physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. The purpose of this school is to encourage students to think and to become makers of meaning and vision.

Desired Results for Student Learning:

The desired results for student learning (DRSLs) of A University for Children are as

follows:

To find a meaningful question.
To search for understanding intelligently.
To evaluate findings scientifically, ethically and philosophically.
To think for oneself deeply.
Of their own volition to continue inquiry and development.
TO SEE THEIR WORLD DIFFERENTLY.

The Visiting Team found that, although the school's DRSLs were written in a unique format and are somewhat difficult to evaluate, they nevertheless well express what A University for Children is all about. The school is commended for creating a rubric that evaluates these DRSLs according to degree of achievement on a scale of one to five. Each student is evaluated by each of his or her teachers. The DRSLs are posted in each classroom, teachers refer to them frequently, and students are mindful of them. They are regarded as something to be achieved, improved upon, etc.

The school is commended for having the DRSLs directly aligned with the beliefs and self-study and for making them an integral part of the curriculum. These DRSLs provide a foundation for ongoing improvement. Furthermore, the Visiting Team believes that the school used the following best practices in creating the DRSLs:

- State of Utah objectives were reviewed in the process of defining goals.
- Educational research was reviewed.
- The analysis of student learning needs takes into account the profile data, the beliefs, and the mission.
- Through the creation of the rubric (five levels of achievement), the DRSLs are measurable.
- Certainly the DRSLs reflect meaningful and challenging goals for student learning.
- The DRSLs cross all discipline content areas.

Analysis of the Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness:

A holistic approach was evident which indicated integrated values and lifelong learning skills, cross-curricular instruction, a variety of teaching methods such as the use of manipulatives, student involvement, implementation of computers in instruction, and in general significant use of technology in the classroom (However, see more on technology elsewhere in this report.) The following commendable practices, as presented in the self-study, were employed in the analysis of instructional and organizational effectiveness:

This school is continually conducting analyses of the school's instructional and organizational effectiveness based on research-based principles of high performing systems of teaching and learning.

The analysis of the instructional effectiveness includes examination of the extent to which the key dimensions of the school's instructional practices are congruent with each other. The question is asked: Are instructional practices and assessment aligned?

It appears that priorities for improving the quality of the work of the school include strategies that build on the strengths of the school as well as strategies that address the limitations of instructional and organizational effectiveness.

The Visiting Team recognizes the quality work of the focus groups in analyzing instructional and organizational effectiveness.

Analysis of the Action Plan:

A University for Children has five goals in its action plan. The Visiting Team notes that the plan is continually revisited and updated as goals are achieved or need revision. No specific dates were given for the accomplishment of the goals; however, "continued" or "newly implemented" was indicated for each. Responsibilities have been assigned to various persons for overseeing the achievement of the goals.

The goals are as follows:

We will upgrade as teachers personally, academically and professionally by diversifying our teacher training.

We will upgrade our technology and equipment.

We will invite the world into our campus.

We will create a stronger sense of belonging and community or respect within our school.

We will upgrade and maintain our facility.

The Visiting Team finds the goals to be meaningful and appropriate for A University for Children. However, not all of the goals are directly related to student learning, nor are they directly aligned with the profile, beliefs, mission, and DSRLs. The school is referred to *School Improvement: Focusing on Student Performance* for a model for achieving the five major tasks of developing an action plan, one of which is to align the goals as mentioned above. In future planning, the school is advised to focus on this alignment and an action plan based on goals for improved learning.

For example, the fifth goal, "upgrade and maintain our facility," however commendable, is not part of an action plan **for improved learning**.

A school improvement plan should be based on achievement of the DSRLs. It should build and strengthen the capacity of the school's instructional and organizational conditions to support students' achievement of the DSRLs.

“Upgrading our facility” could perhaps be part of a second action plan, a plan for improvement of the building, or for beautifying, etc. Indeed, a school may have two or three different kinds of action plans.

CHAPTER 3: THE SCHOOL’S ADHERENCE TO THE NASCU STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION

A University for Children meets the ten standards of the Northwest Association of Schools and of Colleges and Universities (NASCU). The school also meets the requirements of the State of Utah Core Curriculum.

CHAPTER 4: GENERAL COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Commendations include but are not limited to the following:

- It appears that A University for Children is institutionalizing (or indeed already *has institutionalized*) the process of reflective inquiry and thereby become internally responsible for the maintenance of high standards or even the creation of high standards. Improving teaching and learning is an intentional and ongoing process at A University for Children.
- A University for Children is involved in “mind mapping” in order to truly best serve the unique learning needs (and learning style) of each student.
- The concepts of “creative freedom” and “teaching with passion” are clearly evident.
- DRSLs are posted in classrooms.
- Local library facilities (both city and BYU) are extensively utilized.
- The cooperation and support of all stakeholders is evident.
- Every effort is made to match students to a given college.
- Keeping “lesson logs” and avoiding the use of old lesson plans are two effective practices.
- It was stressed that the school has a “developmental philosophy.”

- The curriculum is integrated, even to the extent that grades are virtually nonexistent.
- The development of higher-level thinking skills is evident in all classes.
- The construction of the new facilities for teaching science is a most positive step forward.

Other commendations are given throughout this report. A University for Children seems to understand that the self-study is a Socratic instruction piece that embodies the democratic style of teaching and learning through continual questioning and answering for the purpose of achieving ongoing improvement.

Recommendations:

- A primary recommendation is that A University for Children better tie into resources for improving technology. Further work with “Intel Teach to the Future” is recommended, or possibly work with BYU or the Nebo School District.
- As discussed at the school in meetings with administrators and faculty, working with CACTUS to update information on teachers, as well as courses, is necessary and should be addressed as soon as possible.